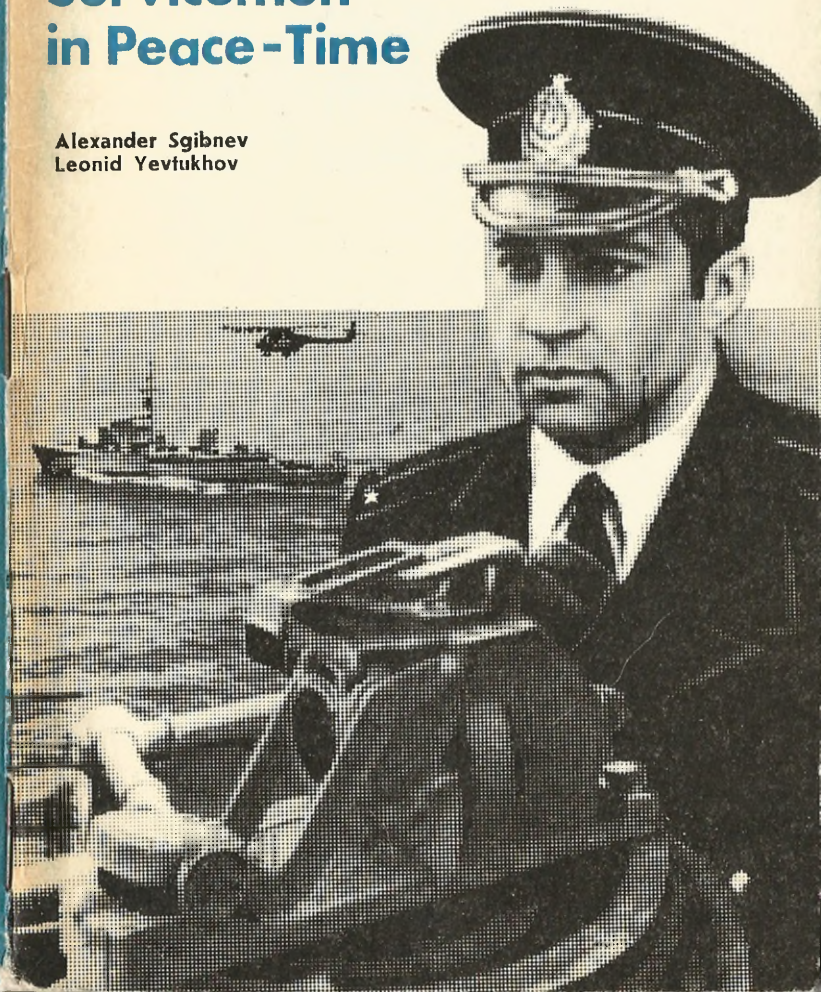


Heroic Exploits by Soviet Servicemen in Peace-Time

Alexander Sgibnev
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CONTENTS

Foreword	5
On Algerian Soil	7
Clearing the Harbour	25
In the Bay of Bengal	30
In the Gulf of Suez	37

Foreword

Sixty years have passed since the world's first workers' and peasants' state was formed on the vast expanses of Russia. The gains of the Great October Socialist Revolution were defended by a soldier wearing a grey greatcoat and a helmet with a five-pointed star on it. A man of the people, he was prepared to face the severest privations and to lay down his life to defend the interests of the working people. Such men formed the army which was at first called the Red Army, then in 1946 renamed the Soviet Army.

Lenin, founder of the Soviet state, said of the Red Army that "...for the first time in world history, an army, an armed force, has been created, which knows what it is fighting for; and ...for the first time in world history, workers and peasants are making incredible sacrifices in the knowledge that they are defending the Soviet Socialist Republic, the rule of the working people. . ."

The Soviet Army has faithfully served its people for already sixty years. In the Civil War (1918-20),

when the future of Soviet power was being decided, the Red Army defeated the forces of domestic counter-revolution and of foreign intervention by fourteen states, thus defending the gains of the October Revolution.

In the hard years of the Great Patriotic War (1941-45), when the point at issue was whether socialism could withstand the onslaught of the Hitler hordes, who were the striking force of world imperialism, the Red Army enjoying the support of the people inflicted a crushing defeat on the troops of the nazi German invaders in fierce and bloody battles.

Driving the enemy from Soviet soil and helping liberate the peoples of many countries from the brown plague, the Red Army opened up to them the road to freedom, independence and social progress. By thus accomplishing its mission the Red Army lived up to its internationalist duty, the duty of assisting the working people of other countries.

Lenin wrote:

"There is one, and only one, kind of real internationalism, and that is—working whole-heartedly for the development of the revolutionary struggle in *one's own country*, and supporting (by propaganda, sympathy and material aid) *this struggle*, this, and *only this*, line, in *every* country without exception."

The peoples of many countries overrun by the nazis in the course of the Second World War were liberated from foreign oppression by the Soviet Army. Over seven million Soviet officers and men fought for this righteous cause for over a year altogether. Over a million Soviet officers and men were buried in European countries the Red Army liberated.

It is not without good reason that many people abroad use the word "internationalist" in speaking

of Soviet armymen. They recall that in the 1930s Soviet servicemen came to the assistance of the Mongolian People's Republic to join in repelling Japanese imperialist aggressors. In the skies over China Soviet volunteer pilots fought together with Chinese pilots against Japanese invaders. On Spanish soil Soviet volunteers fought together with the Republican forces to defend the democratic government against the onslaught of Franco fascist forces. The monuments commemorating Soviet soldiers who liberated West European countries from Hitler fascism have been erected as a tribute to the internationalism of the Soviet soldier who is always ready to come to the aid of his neighbour, brother and friend. Soldiers of every generation of Soviet people have always been loyal to this tradition.

The events of the Second World War are gradually receding into the past. The last salvoes and volleys of the war were fired more than thirty years ago. As in the past the Armed Forces of the USSR stand on guard to protect the peaceful constructive efforts of their people from possible attack by aggressive imperialist forces. There have been cases when the Soviet people sent their sons faraway to developing countries to give them generous help in clearing their fields and waters of mines and in salvaging sunken ships. This is also internationalism in action. The present pamphlet is about such aid.

On Algerian Soil

The Soviet army engineers who had been working in Algeria had not met each other again for a long time.

It was Col. Mikhail Lomakin, one of the commanders of the sapper detachment in Algeria, who took the initiative of organising a reunion in Moscow. The idea was to get together again and recall how they had brought back to life dead soil cluttered with mines the French army had laid.

There was a quick response: some sent letters, others—telegrams. Everybody was glad to see their comrades again.

So Mikhail Lomakin was recently host to an unprecedented number of guests.

"Do you remember?..." one began.

"And do you happen to know?..." another asked.

The friends exchanged hearty embraces. They eagerly scanned photographs and old and new newspapers...

Here is the story.

In 1962 the people of Algeria won their freedom in bitter fighting. As the French army withdrew it left vast areas of land fenced off with barbed wire and planted with millions of mines. The Algerian-Moroccan frontier was known for its "zones of death". They were from three to five kilometres, sometimes even fifteen kilometres wide, extending over a distance of 1,200 kilometres. Similar "zones of death" lined the Algerian-Tunisian frontier too, which was somewhat shorter—800-900 kilometres. Here there were up to 20,000 booby traps per kilometre.

Who put them there and why? The French army command had decided to seal Algeria off completely from the rest of the world and to prevent the national-liberation army from receiving any aid.

The French navy blockading the Algerian coast had full control of the sea. The fishermen of Nemours, Port Say, La Calle and other seaside towns

could not even go fishing, because the French patrol vessels would stop them.

But there were land frontiers, above all with Morocco and Tunisia. The peoples of these countries had already won their independence and they supported the liberation struggle their brothers and neighbours were waging. Women, children and old people went to those countries to find refuge from the terror of the French warlords. And from them the freedom fighters received weapons, ammunition and medical supplies.

The French generals decided to close the frontiers with Morocco and Tunisia by placing obstacles comprising many rows of mined barbed-wire fences, through some of which they ran an electric current of 6,000 volts. But the mine-fields could not stop the successful offensive of the national-liberation army. These fields, however, were a source of constant danger to people who could not live and work normally. Much of the fertile soil was unusable. The mines also blocked access to wells and other sources of water, obstructing their normal use.

Some circles in the West raised a fuss about clearing Algerian soil of French mines in the hope of profiting from it. "So you need aid? Well, we're ready to help you. At a price, of course." Two thousand million francs, one firm said. The Soviet Union, on its part, offered disinterested aid.

To begin with a group of Soviet officers of the engineering corps arrived. They were expert in demining, real masters of their craft. Most of them, men like Maj. Gen. Pyotr Fadeyev, Col. Vladimir Pakhomov, Lieut. Col. Yuri Galkin, Maj. Mikhail Lomakin and Capts. Ivan Shcherba and Ivan Tkachenko, had had previous experience in clearing mine-fields during and after the Great Patriotic War. Even the youngest officer, Sen. Lieut. Anatoli

Ulitin, who had not fought in the antifascist war, had already defused over 25,000 mines, shells and bombs of various kinds in Byelorussia and the Smolensk region.

Upon arrival the officers went to examine the mine-fields near the small town of Marnia, on the Algerian-Moroccan frontier.

They found most of the mines had been laid among dense barbed-wire entanglements. The barbed wire had to be removed before they could clear the mines. But only powerful tank retrievers could remove it. They also saw that most of the mines had plastic cases and no metal components. This meant they could not be located by mine-detectors. Furthermore, nobody knew the pattern the French had followed in planting the mines.

After the preliminary inspection Col. Pakhomov, senior officer of one group, said:

"We can't work blindly. We must first discover the system the French used in laying the mines."

Pakhomov and Galkin spent many hours studying maps, plans and reports on mining, some of which the French military command had handed over to the Algerian government.

The French diagrams had a letter and figure code. How to relate them to the topographical maps? In one batch of maps the officers found a map with markings. These provided a key to the puzzle. But another difficulty cropped up: the compass bearings on the plans did not tally with their designation in figures. It transpired that in the French documents a circle had 400 degrees instead of the usual 360.

Upon their arrival in Algeria the Soviet officers found that the established methods of demining which had served well in the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) were of no use in Africa. Something new had to be devised.

Without waiting for equipment to come from the Soviet Union they decided to improvise light sweeps to detonate anti-personnel mines. These sweeps looked like a harrow. When prototypes were tried out, they worked, though not effectively enough. The deeper mines did not explode, they remained untouched.

Meanwhile tank retrievers arrived from the Soviet Union. Even without their gun turrets the famous T-34 tanks were an impressive sight. Not only the dark eyed sun-tanned children, but also the grey-bearded Arabs in their snow-white turbans looked at them with hopeful expectation.

Without wasting time the twenty-year-old drivers drove the tanks to the mine-field zones.

"Who's going first?" asked Col. Pakhomov.

"May I try?" said Jr.-Sgt. Pyotr Listrakov.

The tank retriever headed for a mine-field studied with anti-personnel mines. It was towing grapnels on wires to explode the trip-wire operated mines. Suddenly the first mine went off with a hollow bang. The first explosion was followed by another and yet another. The tank advanced through fire and smoke amid black and red flashes. The tank retriever crossed the mine-field and stopped. Everybody ran to it. The hatch slowly opened and the driver's tense face appeared.

"Well, what's it like?" he was asked.

"The sound is terrific, especially if the mine goes off under the tank. But it's bearable." Listrakov replied.

Col. Pakhomov carefully inspected the track links and the armour which was densely pockmarked with splinter dents. Frowning, he remarked:

"We can't go on like this. We must spare the men... and the tanks too. We must think of something..."

By the next morning a simple device was ready. A long boom was fixed to the side of the tank with grappnels attached to the end of it. The tank retriever no longer had to move through the mine-field. It could now skirt its edge.

Anatoli Listrukov again took his place at the controls.

But the tank had hardly gone a hundred metres or so when mine splinters severed the wire. The experts came up with one proposal after another. Finally one idea was adopted. They decided to replace the wire with a long angle bar virtually invulnerable to splinters. They tried it out and it proved effective.

The team of army engineers continually had to solve problems that kept cropping up. For instance, what to do with the barbed wire? Indeed, before destroying the mines, they had to remove thousands of kilometres of barbed wire that covered the soil of Algeria like a web.

Lieut. Col. Galkin proposed:

"Let's cut it up into sections and have the retrievers tow it off to one side."

They tried this method and checked the result. Several hundred metres a day. It was not worth the effort.

Lomakin said:

"We should draw the wire along the strip. But how should we go about it?"

"Why not do it the way mine-sweepers work at sea?" Sen. Lt. Ulitin suggested.

He took a stick and drew a diagram on the dry scorched ground.

"Run a thick hawser from one retriever to another. The two tanks travel in 'line abeam' formation outside the mine-field, using the hawser like a sea

sweep to remove the entanglements. It will be very much more productive."

Listrukov and Ulitin were the first to drive two retrievers in this way. After going about three hundred metres both tanks stopped. Listrukov stuck his head out of the hatch and when he saw the results he remarked with satisfaction:

"Look, everything's working out well."

The tank with a white number 11 on its side had an unusual appearance. Ahead of each track it carried a heavy bracket bearing six large and heavy toothed discs. These discs detonated the mines in the ground without harming the vehicles. The commander of the tank crew was Sen. Sgt. Nikolai Mitasyev. The most difficult missions calling for highly skilled handling of the tank were entrusted to this crew. It had, for instance, on one occasion to go through a mine-field ahead of the other tanks to clear a passage between two barbed-wire fences. Here is an account of it written at that time:

"The hatch covers closed with a thud. After the blinding sun outside one can hardly see anything in the semi-darkness of the AFV. Starting the engine Leonid Dovghi, the driver, sets the tank weighing many tons smoothly in motion.

"Our eyes gradually adapt to the semi-darkness of the tank turret. Through the commander's viewer you can clearly see the slope of the hill.

"Will we get stuck?" I thought anxiously. "We are carrying a heavy sweep in front."

"The powerful tank engine was working at top speed. But it seemed the tank might stop at any moment. This did not daunt the driver who calmly operated the controls. The tank crawled on over the hill.

"Down below in the fore compartment Muhammed Ben Yamin's dark eyes shone in the dim light

of a small electric bulb. He concentrated his attention on the movements of Leonid Dovghi, his instructor. He did his utmost not to miss a single movement.

"The crew members heard the quiet voice of their commander Nikolai Mitasyev coming through the headphones:

"We are now approaching the edge of the mine-field! Off we go!"

There were two rows of barbed-wire entanglements ahead. Between them there was a narrow passage about four metres wide, overgrown with thick tall green grass.

As they started off the seep struck a mine which exploded with a muffled report like a pistol. The tank jolted slightly, the acrid smell of explosive reached the crew.

"That was an *apida*, a French high-explosive mine," the tank commander told the crew over the intercom. After that one explosion followed another, practically without interruption. Sometimes they went off like single shots, at other times it seemed a submachine gun was firing bursts.

Suddenly the team was blinded by a bright orange-yellow flash. One's eyes closed spontaneously. It was accompanied by a hollow explosion. Splinters, stones and lumps of soil battered the tank armour. That was a bounding fragmentation mine, an American *bondissant*, as the French called it.

The sweep and tank tracks exploded a few more *apidas*. We checked the time. In one hundred and fifty seconds there had been thirty-six explosions. One could not claim to be extremely accurate, because the eye could not register every flash and smoke fountain mixed with dust. The tank was full of dust by then. It was difficult for the crew to breathe. Even the gauze masks did not help

much. One hour later the tank made a brief stop. Mitasyev did not allow the crew members to leave the tank straightaway. He first took a careful look around. It sometimes happened that unexploded mines landed on the tank body.

After a brief rest the crew commander ordered everybody aboard again. When the tank finally reached the end of the belt a loud unfamiliar voice addressed the crew through the headphones:

"Number Eleven, this is Number Eight calling. Stop!"

The tank stopped. Such orders were executed without delay. Normally it meant men were working in the open and a bursting mine could wound them.

Lower down, about three hundred metres away from No. 11 two tank retrievers—T-34 tanks without turrets—were standing in "line abeam" formation. One of them was in the strip the mine-sweeping tank had cleared and the other was on the other side of the barbed-wire entanglements. Several men in green overalls were attaching a thick steel hawser to the retrievers. The crew commander recognised the spare figure of the officer in charge of operations. It was Capt. Vladimir Busalayeve.

He had gone to the war front as a boy of seventeen in 1943 and had remained in action with the army till the end of the war. But for Busalayeve the Victory Salute in May 1945 did not mean the end of the war. As far as he was concerned it went on for another five years. He continued to work with a mine-probe and mine-detector. He had to go slowly over his own native soil, checking it inch by inch and clearing it of mines, shells and bombs.

"This is Number Eight calling Number Eleven. We are back in the tank, you can carry on now,"

Capt. Busalayev radioed. Then the crew heard him issue an order to his team:

"Start up the engines, off we go!"

Both retrievers began to move slowly ahead. The steel hawser between them became taut as it began to drag the barbed-wire entanglements along. As they were drawn they set off *apidas* which went off with a bang. Once in a while the detonating *bondisants* would drown all other sounds by their blasts. The tanks would advance through clouds of smoke to the accompaniment of an unending roar of explosions. You could see the pile of barbed wire steadily mounting behind them. The wire was enveloped in smoke and constantly shaken by the exploding mines.

Gradually the strip of land cleared of barbed wire grew wider. The retrievers were moving on farther and farther away. They were followed by a tank bulldozer which used its plough to remove the remnants of barbed wire from the strip where the retriever could not pass.

When tank No. 11 had finished sweeping it moved to a clear spot and stopped. The heavily armoured turret hatch was lifted and Nikolai Mitasyev's ribbed black helmet appeared.

"We've finished our task for today," he announced with a grin. "Tomorrow we'll do more mine-sweeping."

But the team could not dispense with mine-detectors altogether.

Jr. Sgt. Viktor Andrushchak reported to Capt. Busalayev: "The mine-detectors are intact and the cables have been checked."

Busalayev briefed the mine engineers on their task.

"Our job today is to clear a section of the mine-field which has American M-3 fragmentation mines.

There is the field in front of you," he said pointing to the area on the map. "And this is the mine-field pattern. The mines are in staggered rows three metres apart."

Two men leaned over the white sheet of paper with the diagram. They were Viktor Andrushchak who had prominent cheek-bones and a slightly turned up nose with wide-open curious eyes and Corpl. Nikolai Demyanyuk, a narrow-faced fellow with light brown eyes.

The captain went on:

"The tank retrievers have already removed the barbed wire and tanks have made several sweeps. But some of the mines were not set off and are still in the ground. It's true some of them have dud fuses. But they are still a hazard."

Capt. Busalayev was the first to enter the mine-field. He moved cautiously, thoroughly inspecting every inch of the ground and probing it with a mine-detector. The gentle swinging of the mine-detector frame gradually slowed down. In a few seconds it stopped altogether. This meant a signal had come through showing there was a mine directly underneath.

The blade of the combat engineer's slitter gleamed brightly in the blinding rays of the African sun. Several cautious movements revealed an American fragmentation mine. The engineer placed a small red flag with the letter "M" above it. Then he resumed his search.

The next person to take up a mine-detector was Viktor Andrushchak.

He was an excellent chess player. He never made a move until he had analysed all the possible variants. When he plays chess his usually smiling face becomes serious. He concentrates on the game. He behaved in just the same way on the mine-field.

Viktor gave careful thought to every move and step. He fully realised that any mistake on the mine-field here would be much more costly than on the chess board.

Viktor was steadily advancing into the field holding his mine-detector. His route was marked with small red flags like a slalom course.

Andrushchak worked meticulously without making a single unnecessary move. He located the mines quickly and confidently. As the boys were having a smoke one of them said:

"Viktor, I think you have a nose for them."

But in fact his results had nothing to do with "having nose for mines". They were due to his thorough preparations. He had carefully adjusted and checked the mine-detector and had studied the mine-field pattern. He would also call to mind the design of the mines and how to neutralise them.

At home he had happened to read a book entitled "The Invisible Enemy", which acquainted him with the mines he was dealing with in faraway Africa. All these factors gave him added confidence and boldness in his work and contributed to his success.

Finally, the last mine in the strip—the ninety-seventh—was located and marked with a flag. Three mines had been set off by the sweep. The next task was to destroy them. This part of the operation was just as important as the first.

Responsibilities had been allocated in advance. And now Corpl. Nikolai Demyanyuk was wiring the mines to explode them electrically. He worked calmly and carefully checking all the connections and insulating them with tape.

Viktor Andrushchak was using a knife to remove the soil that covered the mines. With several brief

and sure movements he opened up the metal edge of the mine casing.

A TNT block was carefully laid on each mine thus exposed. When everything was ready Capt. Busalayev would issue the order:

"Everyone take cover in the retriever!"

He would then complete the final part of the operation himself. He would connect the electric fuses to the wiring and put them into the blocks.

Then a warning would be issued to all the sentry posts winging the area. Smart cars, hard-working trucks and heavily laden donkeys would stop at a safe distance on the grey paving of the highway.

Then the command: "Fire!"

The button of the firing machine would be depressed to detonate the explosive. Splinters and lumps of soil would hit the tank's armour.

The Soviet sappers conducted the mine-clearing operations together with Algerian army officers and men. They would share their grief in the event of a mishap. Such things happened too. . .

A hollow explosion filled the men's hearts with anxiety. They heard a few mine fragments whine over the heads of the men. The dense cloud of black smoke slowly dispersed.

Everyone rushed to the scene of the accident on an impulse. Sgt. Ahmed, an Algerian engineer, had been hit. First to reach him were Col. Vladimir Pakhomov, leader of the group, and Maj. Mikhail Lomakin. They happened to be nearest to the spot. The others arrived very soon.

Though the doctor, Mark Bolotov, arrived only a few minutes later, Ahmed was no longer bleeding and his wound had been dressed.

The injured man was carried away from the mine-field and taken to the hospital.

Mark Bolotov, who accompanied Ahmed to the hospital, returned that evening and said:

"The operation was successful. Ahmed will be back in two or three weeks."

They say demolition men live to make only one mistake. It proved true in the case of Capt. Ivan Shcherba. He was in charge of operations in one of the sectors. The sun had passed its zenith and the lunch hour was approaching. The engineers were leaving the danger zone. Only Ahmed did not leave.

"What's the matter, friend?" Shcherba inquired.

"We are one mine short," Ahmed explained, raising a finger for the sake of clarity.

According to the French documents there should have been nine mines there. They had found eight. Where was the ninth? It had to be somewhere nearby. It could not be left lying about. Ivan Shcherba gave Ahmed a gentle push as if to say: "Go on, I'll find it myself." But Ahmed shook his head and refused to leave.

Ivan said with a smile:

"Go take cover."

The sappers follow an unwritten law whereby only a minimum number of men should be exposed to danger. The Algerian obeyed and slowly retired.

Ivan Shcherba tried to reconstruct the pattern of the mine-field in his mind's eye. They had been laid thirty centimetres apart. Until then this distance had been meticulously observed. And who could have thought someone might have worked carelessly?

Ivan measured twenty centimetres from the last *apida* they had located and cautiously probed the ground with a bayonet. Then he applied a little more pressure. At that moment the captain saw a blinding flame...

A few hours after the doctor had given him first aid Ivan Shcherba was taken to a hospital in Oran,

where a group of Bulgarian surgeons operated on him immediately. Only two hours later did Doctor Lyuben Lukov leave the operating theatre. Slowly he removed his rubber gloves and said:

"There is little hope of restoring his eyesight. He has also severe concussion of the brain."

Bulgarian, Algerian and Soviet doctors selflessly fought for the life and health of the courageous Soviet officer. Capt. Ivan Shcherba was flown from Oran to Moscow by an Il-18 airliner specially chartered for this flight. In Moscow the best specialists performed another operation. But their efforts were in vain. The last thing Ivan saw was the blue sky over Algeria and its reddish soil.

A poet wrote a poem about Ivan Shcherba who lost his sight while clearing a mine. It is now a text in a reader for Algerian children. They repeat after their teacher:

"Ivan Shcherba is a brave Soviet officer. His name symbolises beauty and friendship. May he see with the eyes of our hearts and our eternal gratitude!"

There is a saying that misfortune never comes alone. About a month after the accident to Ivan Shcherba the officers, Yuri Galkin and Mikhail Lomakin, went to survey some mine-fields that had not been plotted. They set out just before their working day ended.

Yuri Galkin said to Mikhail Lomakin:

"Tomorrow we are starting a new sector. Let's chart the paths for the tanks with the sweeps."

They had nearly finished surveying the sector when Yuri Galkin stepped on a mine as he was searching for the stake marking the edge of the field. A sharp hollow blast and a column of black smoke announced another accident.

The doctors managed to save Yuri Galkin's leg and foot. But he had to undergo many painful oper-

ations and had to spend many long weeks in hospital.

Yuri Galkin, now a colonel, is still serving in the ranks of the Soviet Army. Only a slight lameness reminds him of the distant but memorable days he spent in Algeria. . .

Ben Hatef, chairman of a farm co-operative, said quietly:

"We have named this field of wheat after Nikolai Pyaskorsky."

He looked at the vast field of ripening wheat which looked like molten amber. Ben Hatef went on:

"Nikolai worked here. He cleared the field of mines and handed it over to the co-operative. The peasants passed a special resolution naming this field after Nikolai Pyaskorsky in memory of his feat."

The Soviet government posthumously awarded the Order of the Red Banner to Corpl. Nikolai Pyaskorsky. The decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet stated:

"For valour and courage displayed in rendering aid to the friendly people of Algeria, while clearing the territory of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria from mines, Corpl. Nikolai Pyaskorsky is hereby awarded. . ."

Nikolai Pyaskorsky discovered, defused and destroyed over ten thousand anti-personnel mines on Algerian soil, including 300 extremely dangerous bounding fragmentation trip-wire operated and pressure action mines.

Here is an account of that tragic day given by Nikolai's friend, Victor Toluzarov.

The two lads were working together. Nikolai was walking along a mined strip locating mines and

marking them with small red flags. Victor was working on an adjacent belt. Suddenly he heard a blast. Nikolai fell, shrouded in a cloud of smoke and dust. Victor rushed to his aid, but it was already too late.

There were other expressions of friendship. The townspeople of Marnia were planting an afforestation belt to halt the encroachment of the Sahara desert with trees and shrubs. The Soviet soldiers willingly helped them. The Algerians would voice their thanks to the Soviet lads who would say:

"We are always glad to help you."

Abdel-kader, a tractor driver at the local co-operative farm, came once to the Soviet engineers, saying:

"Russian brother, help me, my tractor has broken down and we have no other machine to do the ploughing."

The engineers asked him what had happened to the tractor and went to the farm with him. Capt. Nikolai Solovyov worked on the tractor for several hours to put it right. In the evening he returned home saying the tractor was now in working order.

That day Mark Bolotov, the doctor, also had a lot to do. He was on duty at the radio station keeping in touch with the crews working on the mine-field. He was about to take a nap when a woman knocked at the window. She was in tears. Dressing on his way out into the street (like all doctors answering an emergency call) he learnt that the woman's son had broken his arm.

He went with the frightened woman to her home. After a careful examination he put the boy's arm in plaster and gave the woman the necessary medicine. Later he visited his patient several times and treated him until he fully recovered.

Once a tall and lean old man in a white turban, the village headman, called on the Soviet soldiers. He spoke very quickly often placing his hand on his heart. The man understood only three words—"well", "water" and "mines". The interpreter later explained what he wanted.

The path to a well with pure spring water was blocked by barbed-wire entanglements and mines. The old man asked the Soviet engineers to clear access to the well. The next day servicemen working under Capt. Busalayev fulfilled his request.

Possibly the most dangerous job was rescuing livestock which got caught in the barbed-wire entanglements on mine-fields. A single movement by a ram entangled in the barbed wire mesh could set off an explosion. But how could you refuse to help a man who looked eagerly at you with eyes full of hope and tears. Very often the cow or donkey trapped in the wire was the main asset and principal sustenance of a large family.

A grey-haired Arab with a withered face put all the warmth of his heart into his handshake with Victor Andrushchak who had rescued a little grey donkey trapped in barbed wire on a mine-field. A poor old woman wept piteously when her only cow could not break free from the barbed wire. And certainly she did not know how better to express her gratitude to the Soviet engineers who rescued her cow from the mined belt.

Service far away from home, in conditions the men were not accustomed to, was not easy. But they knew how necessary their mission was, felt the warmth of the Algerians and this brought the men satisfaction and helped to complete their dangerous work in clearing mines from the territory of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria.



A Soviet and an Algerian sappers at work.

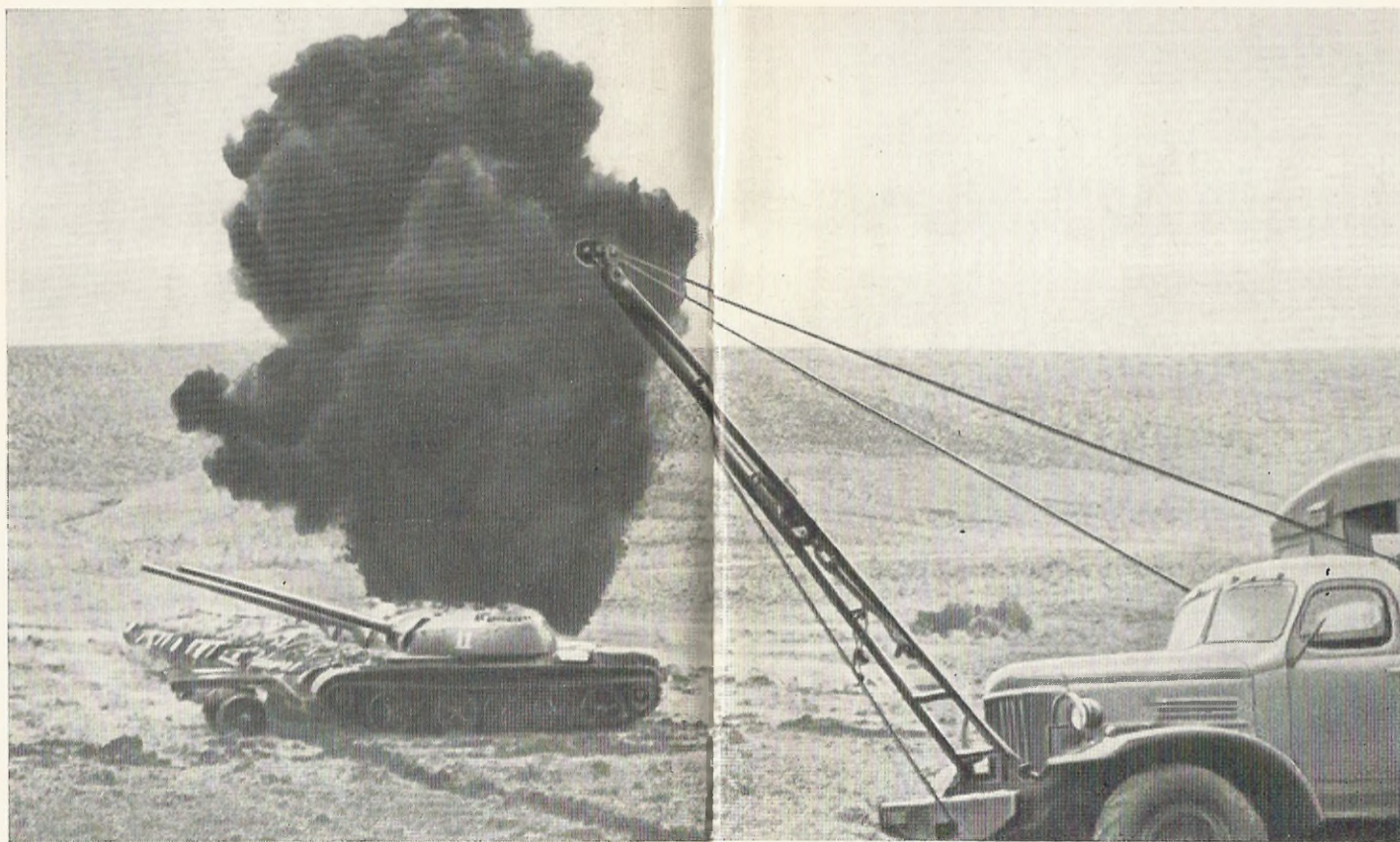
Captain First Class A. V. Apollonov directing the mine-sweeping operations.



The crew of a mine-clearing tank in Algeria.



One more mine detonated (Algeria).

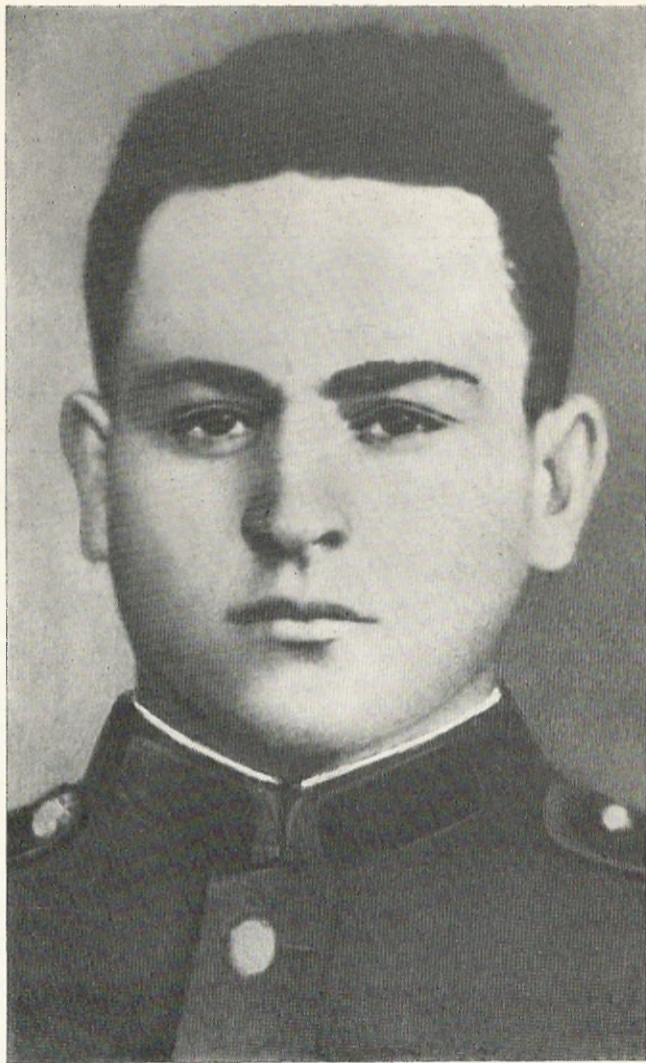


The crewmen of Soviet mine-sweepers who arrived in the Arab Republic of Egypt to clear the Gulf of Suez of mines.



This iceberg effect is caused by the exploding of mines.





**Указ Президиума Верховного Совета СССР
О НАГРАЖДЕНИИ ОРДЕНАМИ СССР
ВОЕННОСЛУЖАЩИХ СОВЕТСКОЙ АРМИИ**

За отвагу и мужество, проявленные при оказании помощи дружественному алжирскому народу по разминированию территории Народной Демократической Алжирской Республики, **наградить:**

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1. Сержанта Толузарова Виктора Федоровича.
2. Младшего сержанта Жигалова Анатолия Федоровича.

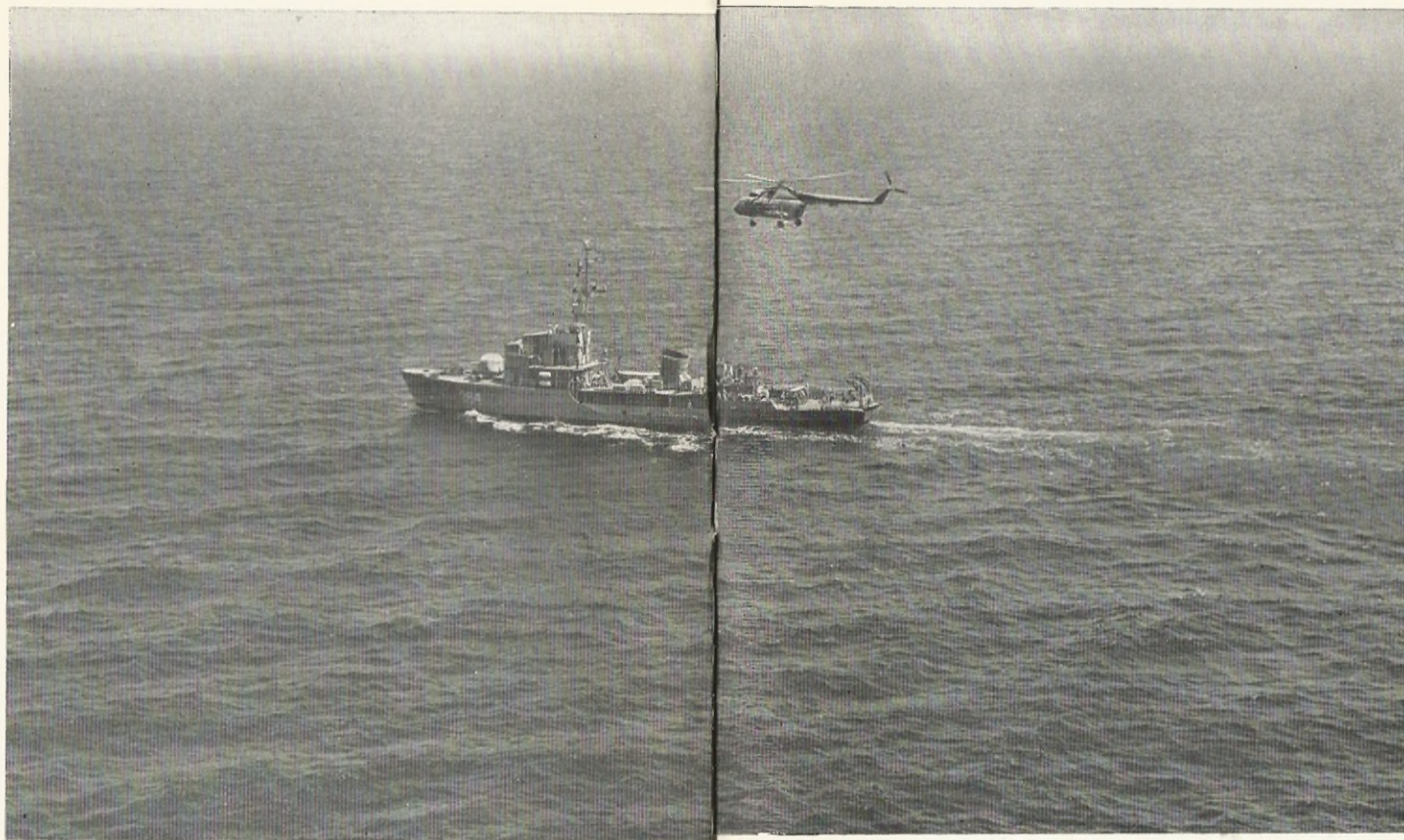
Председатель Президиума Верховного Совета СССР
Л. БРЕЖНЕВ.

Секретарь Президиума Верховного Совета СССР
М. ГЕОРГАДЗЕ.

Москва, Кремль. 17 апреля 1964 г.

A decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet on awarding orders to Soviet servicemen for valour and fortitude shown in the course of rendering assistance to the friendly Algerian people in clearing their territory of mines. First on the list, is N. Pyaskorsky's name.

PFC Nikolai Pyaskorsky who was killed in Algeria engaged in mine-clearing.



A mine-spotting helicopter and mine-sweeper team in the Gulf of Suez.



Capt. Alexander Apollonov (left) commands the Soviet expedition in the Gulf of Suez.

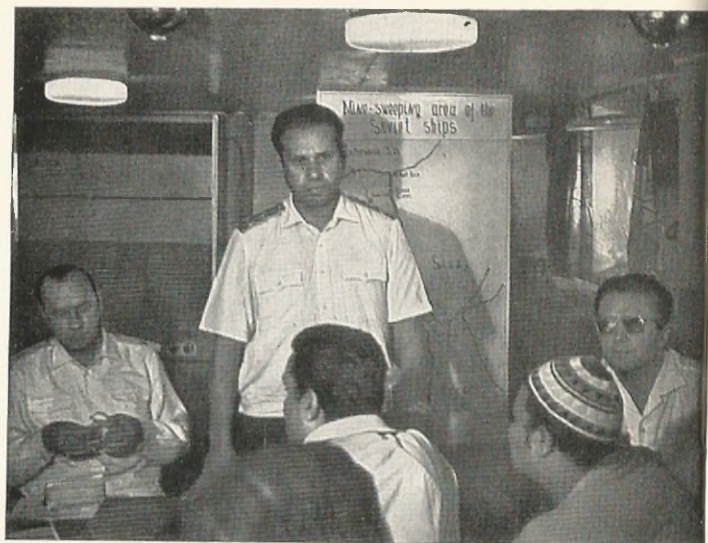
Setting out the sweeping gear in the Gulf of Suez.

Aboard a mine-sweeper.





Salvaging operations in the port
of Chittagong.



After clearing the fairway of the Gulf of Suez a press conference for Soviet and foreign journalists was held on board one of the Soviet ships which had taken part in the mine-sweeping operations.

Clearing the Harbour

The glaring disc of the sun which just risen above the horizon was not yet casting heat. But it was already shedding generous light on the Republic of Bangladesh and the steep point at the entrance to the port of Chittagong. The Bay of Bengal breathed the wholesome freshness of an early tropical morning. The horizon was swiftly receding into the expanses of the Indian Ocean. It was strange to watch a Liberian tanker creeping into the harbour cautiously at very slow speed, as if making its way through dense fog or pitchblack darkness. It seemed strange to a layman, but not to a sailor.

No one could get a clear view of the safe channel marked on the pilot's chart by a sharp blue pencil but not marked on the serene unrippled surface of the water. The eyes of the cautious captain of the tanker were glued to the chart and the line marking the channel. He knew that the waters on either side of the channel were mined.

When the headland was on the tanker's beam, the ship lowered its flag to half mast and with a long siren blast saluted a modest obelisk sat on the high shore among palms. This was a memorial to a Soviet sailor buried there. He had lost his life when the Soviet naval salvage expedition had just started clearing a channel through the mine-fields. Though narrow as a bottle-neck the approach channel to the port of Chittagong was now safe. The sailor had been killed when the Soviet expedition was salvaging from the inner roads a merchantman sunk there by bombs and torpedoes.

Every ship entering the harbour saluted the obelisk. The dipping of flags and long siren blasts were fitting tributes to this man.

Chittagong is sometimes referred to as the Sleeping Beauty. Framed in the emerald green of rice fields and coconut palms and bathed in golden rays of sunlight Chittagong does, indeed, seem like a fairytale city drawn in soft pastel colours.

In Bengali "gong" means city and "chitta" means fire, flame, luminary or lamp. The city of Chittagong played a special role in the struggle of the People's Republic of Bangladesh for independence.

On March 26, 1971, Chittagong sounded the call to fight. The whole country heard it. The Flag of Independence and Freedom with the bright red ball of the sun on a green cloth flew over the whole of the Republic.

The first steps the young independent republic took were indeed difficult ones. The country's economy was in ruins. Life in the scarred city of Chittagong, the country's main port and sea gate, came to a standstill. The damaged hulls of sunken ships and the mine-fields laid on the harbour approaches blocked the flow of food, medical supplies and clothing to the country. Thousands of dockers thronged the quayside in front of the empty warehouses in the hope of receiving work.

Guided by feelings of sincere friendship for the people of the young republic the Soviet Union sent a naval salvage expedition to Chittagong.

Work on bringing the port back to life began late in March 1972. People ashore could hear strange sounds in the distance. It seemed as if a village blacksmith's bellows were blowing. Several loud-speakers were "relaying" the breathing of divers working underwater in the holds of sunken ships.

Once in a while a voice coming from the depths of the bay would say:

"Switch on, please."

"Cut the power off!"

"Start pumping!"

The divers were busy examining the sunken ships, welding and cutting metal, patching up holes in the hulls and conducting blasting operations. Naturally, they were working on the sea bed.

"Put on your diving suits!" Midshipman Ivan Semyonov ordered.

A few minutes later a couple of divers would be going to the bottom.

Yuri Senatski, a ship salvage expert, said:

"The Karnaphuli river, on whose estuary Chittagong lies faced us with many problems. The speed of the current is from four to five metres a second, whereas safety regulations for divers forbid working in currents whose speed exceeds from two to three metres a second. If a diver happened to lose his safety cable he would immediately be carried away by the current. To complicate matters the direction of the current in the estuary changes four times a day. The divers had to work mainly when the current was changing direction, that is to say, during the 'stop water' period. But that wasn't the worst of it.

"Draw a glassful of water from the river and in several minutes a layer of silt one and a half or two centimetres thick will settle on the bottom of it.

"On the sea bed in the bay it is pitch dark. The local dolphins have solved the problem most effectively. They cannot see but their sonar system is superb. So what should a diver do in such circumstances?"

In northern latitudes the diver can see quite well

even at depths from 25 to 70 metres. So if anybody asks a diver, he will say from habit:

"Let me see. Oh, I can see very well!"

In practice the divers worked with their eyes closed. Like blind men they examined hundreds of square metres of the shell plating of ships with the tips of their fingers. Surface teams made mock-up models and on the basis of divers' reports the command decided on the method of raising ships.

All the sunken ships were full of tightly packed silt. The holds of the *Surma*, for instance, contained 16,000 cubic metres of it. In order to raise the ship this load had first to be removed.

The *Surma* was one of the last ships the expedition refloated. Altogether it salvaged a total of fourteen vessels.

Rear Adm. Sergei Zuyenko, commander of the expedition, cited the conclusion of experts on the possibility of salvaging the vessels sunk in the port of Chittagong which read:

"The use of pneumatic pontoons is hardly possible. Blasting operations constitute a hazard. The works of divers will have to be reduced to the minimum."

Many of the experts' expectations were proved wrong by the skill and resolve of Soviet sailors.

Here is an instance. The tanker *Mahtar Javed II* had been sunk off the grain jetty. To salvage it in the normal way would have required a series of underwater blasting operations. This would have meant closing the jetty for some time, which, in turn, threatened to interrupt food supplies to the population.

Foreign specialists were sceptical about the possibility of refloating the tanker whole. But Rear Adm. Zuyenko gave orders for the ship to be salvaged in one piece. Pneumatic pontoons were placed under

the tanker at night so as not to interfere with the ship movements at the grain jetty during the hours of daylight. The men worked twelve hours a day. Finally the huge hulk of the *Mahtar Javed II* rose to the surface. A few hours later several tugs towed it clear of the inner roads. Soviet sailors here performed feats of salvage without precedent in world practice.

In Chalna, another port of Bangladesh, the harbour was cleared by an international consortium. The engineers working there resorted to the simplest possible procedure. They broke up the sunken ships and left the pieces lying on the sea bed. As a result, the place can no longer be used as an anchorage. But the consortium netted its eight million dollars.

The local paper *Sangbad* said that even the sceptics highly rated the work Soviet sailors carried out, when they saw for themselves what the Soviet expedition had accomplished. Apart from the sceptics, there were people who simply disliked the very idea of a Soviet salvage expedition working there. Some papers raised a fuss, alleging that a Soviet military base was being built in Bangladesh. Moreover the *Los Angeles Times* sent special correspondent William Drummond who wrote an article about the "mysterious role" the Russians were playing in Bangladesh. But William Drummond himself had to admit that he found nothing mysterious in what the Russians were doing. The American journalist declared that the Russians were engaged purely in salvage operations to clear the harbour of wrecks.

Abu Sayeed Choudhury, the then President of the Republic of Bangladesh, issued a statement which concluded:

"On behalf of the people of Bangladesh and on my own behalf I would like to express our gratitude to you, to your people and your government for the aid you have rendered in clearing the port of Chittagong. We shall always remember the dangerous work you did which was an important contribution to the further strengthening of friendship and cooperation between our peoples."

In the Bay of Bengal

While divers were salvaging wrecks in the port of Chittagong, another section of the expedition, consisting of a Soviet naval mine-sweeping formation, was clearing the Bay of Bengal of mines which blocked the passage and approaches to the harbour.

Before the arrival of the Soviet salvage expedition in Chittagong a formation of Indian naval mine-sweepers had painstakingly cleared mines from one of the harbour zones. The Indian mine-sweepers had swept a narrow channel one mile wide and 33 miles long, clearing a large number of mines. But the situation continued to be difficult. Strong currents, shallow water and the uneven sea bed made the mines drift together with their anchors. Very soon an Indian ship and then a tanker struck mines on the approaches to Chittagong. Foreign companies took advantage of this incident to impede the delivery of cargoes to the young republic.

Lloyd's, an association of English insurance underwriters, declared Chittagong a high-risk port. The company said that the owners of a vessel ven-

turing to enter the port even only once, should pay a 25 per cent higher insurance premium.

Several hundred square miles of sea had to be swept. Since the water was muddy, TV equipment could not be used in the search for mines. The strong current caused ships to drift. There was no accurate information on the location of the minefields. And the job also had to be completed in a fixed time.

The most effective way for sweeping mines in these conditions had to be found and the clearing of mines on the approaches to Chittagong had to begin without delay.

On May 2, 1972, the first mine exploded on contact with the sweeping gear of one of the first Soviet harbour mine-sweepers.

The whole country followed the progress the Soviet mine-sweepers made in clearing the waters of mines. Both friends and foes realised the importance of this extremely difficult and risky task. Some quarters in the West were displeased by the success of the expedition. A few articles in the Western press asked what were Soviet ships doing in the Bay of Bengal. The purpose of these articles was obvious, namely, to sow in people's minds distrust of the Soviet expedition.

Rear Adm. Sergei Zuyenko, commander of the expedition, invited on board one of his mine-sweepers all the journalists who wished to view the minefields. The journalists now saw for themselves what a formidable job the mine-sweepers were doing.

The little ships slowly headed through the Bay of Bengal. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes to hours. No one could possibly tell when an exploded mine would raise a water spout aft. An officer would then make an entry in the log record-

ing the latitude and longitude and the time the mine was destroyed. Was it the last one?

The terms of the mine-sweeping operation required that the sweep should not miss a single square metre of the water surface. Achieving this called for extremely accurate navigation. To this end a coordinating post, consisting of six members of the expedition, was landed first on the island of Kutabdia and then on Maiskhal Island. Fitted with special equipment and apparatus the post ensured the required degree of accuracy in sweeping.

Recalling those days Lieut. Vassilyev says:

"We anticipated that in places remote from cities and never yet visited by Soviet people they should know very little about our country.

"When the helicopter landed us we found ourselves in a real jungle. The grass was taller than a man and there were many monkeys in the trees. The most curious monkeys hung from the boughs by their tails and watched us pitch our tents. We had brought everything we might possibly need from nails to camp beds and firewood, which was sold by weight here. We slept outdoors, because it was too stuffy in the tents.

"The next day we were visited by peasants from the local villages. It was a pity none of us knew Bengali. But we had a stroke of luck. Seaman Yelanon, a Buryat Mongolian by nationality, learnt enough Bengali in two weeks to conduct a conversation. Whether this was due to a rare gift for languages or to an affinity between Buryat and Bengali, the situation changed radically. When the peasants learnt who we were and what we were doing, they brought presents to our camp: baskets of bananas, pineapples and bread-fruit. The sailors saw some *Byelarus* tractors at work in the rice fields.

"One evening after a friendly football match (two six-a-side teams played) we began talking about sports. And here we could see that transistor radios had worked wonders: the local sports fans knew the names of the famous Soviet hockey players Anatoli Firsov, Valeri Kharlamov, Vladimir Petrov and Alexander Maltsev. The Bengalese are great lovers of grass hockey and they are also interested in ice hockey.

"Our departure was both a sad and a joyful occasion. The peasants were sad because they regarded us as members of their own community and knew all of us by our first names. At the same time, it was a source of joy because, as the radio announced, the waters of the Republic of Bangladesh were now free of mines.

"One thousand and one square miles of the Bay of Bengal had been examined metre by metre. This meant that the sailors had spent months on vigilant watch and that months of hard work were now behind us.

"As the Soviet mine-sweepers were completing their work on the last few square miles, they saw many oil tankers, ships with grain, foodstuffs and equipment making their way to Chittagong. As they drew abeam of our ships they saluted the naval vessels by dipping their flag. This was not just in observance of marine custom and usage. The men on these ships waved their hands in friendly greeting to Soviet ships that were affirming peace and good-neighbourliness at sea and on Earth."

I cannot help recalling one of the farewell concerts given at the expedition's club. The Soviet sailors had rebuilt and turned a half-destroyed port warehouse into a club. Many people appeared on the stage, including port workers and clerical staff. Among them was Mr. Mannam, the Bengalese liai-

son officer, with his wife and daughter. They sang their own and Russian songs together with the Soviet sailors and officers. Mr. Mennam was not only a good singer but also a good writer. He wrote a letter from Bangladesh to the Soviet newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* about his contacts with Soviet people.

The paper published it. Here is the full text:

"Quite unexpectedly I learnt from my superior that the Soviet government and the government of Bangladesh had signed an agreement on clearing the port of Chittagong of mines and of sunken ships. We all heaved a sigh of relief. In the course of four months we had approached many states with a request to help us clear the port, but without any results. And suddenly the news came that the Soviet Union had agreed to render us aid free of charge. My colleagues surrounded me, overjoyed by the news. As I told them of the practical help we were going to receive their faces expressed mounting interest and animation. One of them enthusiastically exclaimed: 'Joi Bangla!'—'Victory for Bangladesh!' and he thumped me so hard with his hand that for a moment I failed to share his enthusiasm.

"My chief told me to maintain liaison with the members of the expedition and to attend to their needs. I was excited about my future work and I looked forward to learning something about the Soviet people. My ideas about them bordered on fantasy. So far as I was concerned they were people from a different planet.

"Meanwhile the first group of Russians arrived to survey the port of Chittagong. My first impression was that they were unpretentious and sincere. I received the first 'blow' from the commander of

the Soviet salvage expedition Rear Adm. Zuyenko. In his leisure time he asked me about the history and traditions of my country, its archeological treasures and I honestly told him what I knew. He asked me about flowers, trees, farming and the quality of the soil. I tried to avoid his questions and to ask counter-questions to conceal my ignorance. One day he gave me a serious test. First of all he asked me to name the flowers growing in the garden in front of the hotel which was his temporary residence. Frankly, I did not know the answers and I tried to get out of my embarrassment. Then he said more or less the following:

"'You must interest yourself in everything about your country, you must learn to see and feel it. If you do not know your own country, you cannot render your own people proper service.'

"The experts will appraise the results of the Soviet expedition. But so far as I personally am concerned Sergei Zuyenko cured me from my conceit, from the self-conceit of a man who thinks he knows everything. And I am grateful to him for this.

"Capt. S. Kokotkin, deputy commander of the rescue expedition, used to tell his men: 'It is a man's duty to help another in the hour of need. This should be the motto of your life.' And these were not idle words, for the Soviet people have proved this time and time again.

"One day a fire broke out in port. In compliance with a request by the port authorities the expedition sent men and equipment to fight the fire. On another occasion a Greek vessel ran aground in the estuary of the River Karnaphuli where the port of Chittagong lies. The expedition took only 15 minutes to dispatch men and tugs to put the vessel afloat again. And, though it is a secret, I shall tell

you that no bill was submitted for the work done. The medical officers of the expedition never asked who their patient was—Russian or Bengalese. As far as they were concerned a patient was a patient. If a Bengalese asked for medical aid, he received it without a word. That was how the members of the expedition lived up to their motto.

"One day when I saluted Capt. Yuri Stefanovski, chief of staff of the expedition, who though invariably serious was a most friendly man, I noticed that he was slightly limping and asked him why.

"'Rheumatism,' he replied.

"I suggested he should rest a little, but he said he must finish a job on time. That was why he could not afford to rest.

"'Time and tide wait for no man,' he added and hastened to attend to his duties.

"The Soviet sailors were not at all accustomed to the difficult climatic conditions, to the scorching sun, to the heavy rains, to the total lack of visibility underwater where they could only 'see' with the tips of their fingers, and to tropical diseases. But nothing could break the will of these people. They were eager to help the people of Bangladesh. All the members of the expedition were guided by a sense of discipline, a concern for efficiency and the time schedule of operations. They put their heart and soul into their work, despite the fact that they had limited opportunities for rest and recreation.

"Such is their character, that is what their conscience bids them do, that is the way they have been brought up, and it is in their blood. Gradually my fantastic ideas about Soviet people vanished and I realised that these were not men from another planet. They are people just like ourselves. Contrary to my initial expectations their behaviour

was not at all foreign to us. They were sociable, friendly and human and were always willing to come to an assistance. They are people just like myself, just like the people of my own country. Only their spirit is more highly keyed. And, as I realised later, this is a distinguishing feature of their character.

"The members of the Soviet salvage expedition worked with devotion and sincere enthusiasm, helping to rehabilitate the war-ravaged economy of the young state of Bangladesh. The great aid they rendered Bangladesh manifested the character and aims of one of the greatest nations whose sons they are.

"A. K. Mannan,
Liaison Officer for
Contacts with the Soviet Salvage
Expedition."

In the Gulf of Suez

The chronicle of the expedition to the Gulf of Suez opens on June 3, 1974. In compliance with a request by the Egyptian government a flotilla of Soviet ships left Soviet ports in the Far East and proceeded to the Red Sea. Trying to avoid typhoons the relatively small mine-sweepers forced their way through heavy and rough seas. The tropical heat, monsoons, raging winds and the exhausting rolling and pitching did not interrupt the established routine aboard the warships. In intervals between difficult watches the sailors prepared the sweeping gear and studied the mine situation in the area of the mine-sweeping operations that lay ahead.

Another group of ships headed by the anti-submarine cruiser *Leningrad* headed for the Gulf of Suez from the Black Sea, following the African coast.

In July 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt had announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company. This marked the beginning of a campaign for the broad use of this important waterway to serve the essential needs of all the countries of the world. When the foreign canal pilots had resigned, Soviet specialists came to the aid of the Egyptians and the canal continued to function normally.

But the military gambles of Israel and its backers halted shipping through the Suez Canal. This happened after the war in 1967. The sea route from Istanbul to Bombay was thereby lengthened by 14,000 kilometres, from Liverpool to Yokohama by 6,000 kilometres and from Marseilles to Aden by 13,000 kilometres. One third of the world's tanker fleet was compelled to extend its route from the Persian Gulf to Mediterranean ports by 16 days. Grave damage was dealt to the world's economy. The Suez Canal, this essential link in the chain of world communications, was out of action for eight years.

The Soviet people came to the aid of the Egyptian people when times were hard for them.

On the evening of July 14, 1974, the Soviet ships cast anchor off Hurgada, a small village near the entrance to the Gulf of Suez. On July 16 the mine-sweepers were already sweeping the mine-fields.

Soon after we arrived at Hurgada we were invited aboard the mine-sweeper *Sakhalinski Komso-molets*. On that day the commander of the Soviet flotilla, Capt. Alexander Apollonov, hoisted his flag

on that ship. He was in charge of the operation to clear mines from the Gulf of Suez.

The mine-field chart was in the navigation room. The mine-fields had already been shaded with oblique strokes. Some of them twice and even three times. This meant the areas had been swept several times with different gear.

Alexander Apollonov, a man of medium height and an energetic officer, was pleased with the assignment he had been given. He was constantly receiving reports and requests to which he replied briefly in a way which showed him to be a man who trusted people and had confidence in them.

Capt. Apollonov discussed the plan of operations with Lieut. Com. V. Orlov, chief of staff, and Lieut. Com. S. Ziyayev, captain of a mine-sweeper. They decided to sweep the area with a contact sweep.

Steel hawsers five hundred metres long kept at the required depth with the help of sweep buoys "ploughed" one furrow after another. Steel cutters very much like the jaws of a crocodile would at any moment snap the mooring cable keeping the anchor mine in position. As soon as the cable was cut the mine would float to the surface, but only for a short while. The gun crews would promptly destroy it with artillery fire.

Sen. Lieut. V. Koikov, skipper for a mine-sweeper, said:

"Mine hunters at sea have certain advantages over their colleagues on land. You cannot plough a city to make sure there are no mines buried there. But you can 'plough' the sea, covering every square centimetre of the potentially mined area. But the sea mine layers are very ingenious and there isn't a single invention in science and technology that they have not made use of. There are bottom mines which lie in wait for their quarry on the sea bed.

Other mines are anchored in position like buoys but are below the surface and invisible. If a ship strikes one of them, the worst will happen. Other mines are set off even without the ship touching them. Some respond to the vibration of the ship's propellers, while others react to the ship's electromagnetic field or to hydrodynamic disturbances caused by the ship's passage. There are mines with ship counting devices. Such mines will not explode even if, say, four ships pass over them, but they will destroy the fifth."

The days dragged on. More and more small five-pointed red stars appeared on the deckhouses of the mine-sweepers. The stars showed the number of mines swept and destroyed. Each star meant another ship saved from destruction in the gulf.

The captains of the mine-sweepers were not striving to sweep as many mines as possible, because that was not the main aim of their mission. Nobody knew exactly how many lethal spheres and cylinders the enemy had scattered in the gulf. This meant that the number of mines destroyed offered no clue to the total number left lying in the water. The main object was to ensure the safety and reliability of sea passage. The ships' crews knew that on completing their operations they had to be able to guarantee the full safety of shipping in the Gulf of Suez. To achieve such a degree of certainty they had to check every square metre of surface many times over. Looking at the taut "bowstring" line of the horizon, one could hardly believe that the day would come when these slow-moving mine-sweepers would finish "ploughing" these expanses and one would be rid of this ever-present exhausting sense of wariness.

The mine-sweepers would put out and haul in the sweeping gear two or four times a day. The palms

of the hands of the men were all in bloody blisters, and their bodies ached with fatigue at night.

Most of the ships were out sweeping. Some of them had earned a well-deserved right to rest. They were alongside the jetty in harbour. Suddenly action stations were sounded.

After a long second of anxious waiting the loud-speaker announced:

"Emergency action and cruise stations! Bottom mine exploded near mine-sweeper. Lieut. Com. Sviridov in command. Ship damaged. Damage-control parties prepare to render urgent assistance to damaged ship."

The whole flotilla was on the move. But no assistance was required. The crew of the mine-sweeper managed to make good the damage on their own. They patched up the hole and returned to Hurgada with one screw working.

Not only the crews of ships at sea are involved in sweeping and destroying mines.

At Hurgada I met a group of sailors under 3rd Rank Eng. V. Lozovoi. They were engaged in defusing and blasting mines.

They were all experienced sailors. Midshipman B. Pigalin began service in the Baltic Fleet way back in 1944. When anyone asks him how many mines he has destroyed he calmly replies:

"We work as a team. I don't remember how many mines I have destroyed. We would call the Baltic waters mined during the war 'soup with dumplings' and would be fishing mines from the sea like dumplings from a saucepan."

We were also impressed with the tight-lipped and rather slow Sen. Lieut. V. Rusyayev, flotilla specialist in diving. Incidentally, the divers were first to explore the sea bed of the Gulf of Suez.

"We were with the first group," Rusyayev recal-

led, "and had to check the anchorages and berths of the ships, examine the shell plating of the mine-sweepers below the waterline and clear the degaussing range to make them immune to magnetic mines. All this was done on time.

"The divers have an enviable wardrobe. They have a suit for every occasion: for cutting and welding metal, for working at great and medium depths, for destroying magnetic mines, for working in good or poor visibility. They frequently had to work on the sea bed in a 'wet version'. This means they carried aqualung-type gear and wore gloves and flippers. They also carried a diver's knife.

"The Red Sea is the warmest, most transparent and saltiest in the world. The underwater visibility is indeed excellent. But in practice this is virtually of little advantage. The diver 'walks' over the 'tree-tops' of a coral forest. At a depth of 20 metres there may be a 220-metre drop. It is better to swim.

"The fish, the sea urchins and clams here are poisonous and awfully aggressive. The Red Sea is inhabited by many species of shark, including the 18-metre whale shark. To be on the safe side the divers working underwater did not go far away from the metal shelter cage that accompanied them."

Another day of mine-sweeping was over. While the sweep crew under Lieut. Y. Bobrov were recovering the sweeping gear weighing several tons, we introduced ourselves to Capt. Lieut. Solodov. From morning till night he pored over a chart. Maintaining radio contact with a shore observation group on the island of Gubal-es-Sagira Solodov saw to it that the ship steered an exact course and that not a single square metre of the surface remained uncovered by the sweeps.

Late at night the mine-sweeper cast anchor. Solodov asked for a rowing boat. Guided by a search-

light beam we went with him to the island. We had not experienced such a deep silence for many years. Except for a group of Soviet sailors there was not a living creature on the island. It was a dead coral rock. For several months the "islanders" had been working from 12 to 18 hours a day with instruments controlling the accuracy of the sweeping. Everyone had his own worries and everyone knew his task like the members of a machine-gun crew. There was an engineman who provided power for the lighting, a radioman who maintained contact and a man working with a theodolite. They also had other jobs. Such as cooking and washing clothes. One of them was a film projectionist. Though they had come from different parts of a big country, had led different lives and had different skills, they formed a closely-knit team with a common mission, spirit and will. We talked until late in the night. We touched on many subjects, including their watch, home and our families. The waves lapped the edge of the coral reach and rolled back hissing into the sea. The Great Bear hung obliquely in the dark sky over the island with its three tents and a cask of fresh water buried in the sand.

Early next morning I asked Capt. Baskakov, helicopter pilot, who was taking off on a mission, to fly over the island of Gubal-es-Sagira. The "islanders" were already at work.

Seen from a helicopter, the ships in formation appeared to be tied to each other. Each turn to new sweeping runs, every manoeuvre and action performed by the crews is executed according to a strict split-second schedule. For our helicopter this was not a joyride.

The ship-based helicopter pilots were not only busy sighting mines that might have surfaced by accident. Using special equipment the helicopters

also took a direct part in the mine-sweeping. They would pick up the towing line of a sweep the sailors had put out. The helicopters buzzed over the water like bees helping the mine-sweepers.

Sitting by the open door of the helicopter I could clearly see the damaged hull of a Liberian tanker. Only two masts and a funnel were sticking out of the water. It had gone down in the strait of Gubal before the Soviet mine-sweepers had begun clearing the mines. A shoal of fish like a flock of birds was "flying" in circles over its lifeless deck.

Before taking off from the deck of the anti-submarine cruiser *Leningrad* I had a long talk with Maj. Husnula Sharipov. He had destroyed two mines. We also discussed the special aspects of the work of naval pilots.

"From the moment he goes to naval college a naval officer trains for long voyages far away from home shores," Husnula said. "An air force officer usually leaves the ground only for a specified number of hours.

"When we helicopter pilots went on a long voyage aboard a ship that sailed nearly half way round the world and when we flew on the other side of the Equator, it certainly altered the frame of mind of the pilots. We have a fine floating airstrip, but it's not easy to serve on it. . ."

Ten minutes later Maj. Sharipov took off on another mission.

Finally, the long-awaited day came when the local radio station broadcast an official communique on the opening of traffic through a channel swept in the Gulf of Suez.

At approximately the same time Capt. Alexander Apollonov, commanding officer of the flotilla, reported to the Commander-in-Chief, Soviet Navy:

"Gulf of Suez completely cleared of mines."

The report was accompanied by a column of figures:

"An area of 1,250 square miles has been swept.

"Mine-sweepers with sweeps covered a distance of 17,839 miles in 272 days of operations.

"The marked channel is 19 miles long.

"The flotilla has anchored 14 hydrographic buoys with radar reflectors.

"The flotilla has anchored 120 sweeping and hydrographic buoys in the area. . ."

In simple language this meant that a safe all-weather route through the Gulf of Suez was now open to all the world's shipping.

* * *

The people of Hurgada largely depend on fishing for their livelihood. A state-owned company has a small factory there, from which fish is delivered to Cairo. The local boat builders make beautiful scows which cannot, of course, venture too far out to the sea. Before the Gulf of Suez was mined the fishermen often went fishing in the gulf waters.

Once I heard a young Arab boy call out:

"Ya-ba, houdni maaq al bahr!"

When I asked what it meant in English, someone said:

"Daddy, please take me out to sea."

The local fishermen traditionally named their vessels after their daughters or sons. But none of them risked taking a child out into the gulf while it was mined. All the fishermen waited for the day when the Soviet sailors would have cleared the gulf waters of mines.

We interviewed the fishermen of two schooners. Ashraf, Mohammed, Housni and Abu Mahmoud had plied their difficult trade for many years.

"Soviet sailors are doing a great job," they told us.

"When the canal is re-opened to shipping, it will bring revenues to our state. Fishing will benefit too. But it's also important to remember it was the Russians who first said: 'Misfortune is everybody's concern...'"

Евтухов Леонид Андреевич
Сгибнев Александр Андреевич

МИРНЫЕ ПОДВИГИ СОВЕТСКИХ ВОИНОВ

на английском языке

Цена 20 коп.